The Tell-Me-A-Story-Lady

How Tom Edison Tried to Read a Whole Library

IF YOU should go into the rooms in the big white library on Fifth Avenue, where all the thousands on thousands of books are kept, or even into one of the smaller New York branch libraries, such as the one on the street near where you live, would it ever occur to you that you must read every one of those books and know what was in them?

No, you probably will say, you would never think of such a thing. It would take too much time, and there are too many movie shows to go to and too much fun to be had playing.

Well, there was a boy once who tried to do just that thing. He was Thomas A. Edison, the great inventor, and although he didn't do what he set out to do he tried hard and only gave up when those who were older than he convinced him that he was trying to do something beyond the power of even such a genius as Edison turned out to be.

Usually after a boy grows up and becomes a great man there is something in his childhood that those who write his biography, the story of his life, can point to as an early proof of his genius. Of course, we who are older know that the boy who is so "smart" that everybody predicts he is going to be a great man very often never amounts to much, but that does not keep us from enjoying stories about the boyhood of those for whom greatness never was predicted, but who really became famous.

And this story of how little Tom Edison started out to read a whole library is one of the most interesting stories of all those told of him. You see, like so many great Americans, Edison was very, very poor when he was a boy. Maybe that is because most American boys are poor. Rich boys may become great, too, but there are not so many of them.

Well, as I said, Tom Edison was so very poor that the only toys he had to play with were those he made himself. His mother used to read to him a great deal, and as she liked to read him books about science and machinery it was natural that he tried to make toys like the things she read about. Once, when he was very small, he built a railroad that ran all around his backyard. He liked to build bridges, so he dug a lot of canals and rivers so he would have something to build bridges over.

Another time she read to him about balloons. The story told how scientists made a big bag and filled it with gas, and the gas lifted the bag up into the air. He was much interested in that and wanted to make a balloon, but he had no bag. But he set his active little mind to work, and then he remembered another story he had heard about two kinds of powder which when mixed together in water made gas. That gave the young inventor an idea. Why not make a human balloon? He told another little boy his plan, which was to get this other little boy to swallow some of the powders and then take a drink of water. The gas, Tom figured, would lift the boy in the air, and he would float around like a balloon.

The mistake Tom made was in not asking his mother or some other grown-up what might happen if he tried a thing like that. The little boy who took the powders was made very ill and Tom was punished.

But that was when he was quite small. When he grew a little older he bought a printing press and printed a newspaper all himself. By this time, of course, he didn't have to be read to, but books were hard to get, and he valued them very highly. He had moved now from the small town where he had lived to Detroit, where there was a big library, something he had never seen. One day just by chance he wandered into this library and was struck with wonder at the sight of the great rows of shelves filled with books. He had not believed there were so many books in the world.

At once he was filled with a tremendous desire to possess those books. He knew he couldn't have the books themselves, but that all that was in them was his for the taking. It seemed to him that everything in them was too precious for him not to have as his very own to carry around in his head, so he made up his mind he would read them all and so know everything they contained.

He was a methodical and systematic boy, and after thinking the matter over he decided that the thing to do was to start in at one end of the shelves and read every book as he came to it till he came to the other end.

So for many days the library attendants watched a boy who came every day and read for hours. He was such a regular visitor that they began to watch for him and then to wonder what he was reading. So they took note of the books he had and learned to their surprise that many of the volumes he pored over were books that only learned men, men who were considered very wise, were accustomed to ask for. If I should tell you the names of some of these books you probably would not even know what they were.

The library attendants knew their visitor was too young to be reading such books. Many of them were books that could not be understood even by an older person unless he had read and studied other books. So one day one of the librarians talked to Tom and got the whole story of this boy who was so hungry for knowledge that he was trying to read every book in the library. The librarian sympathized with his ambition, but explained to him that no one person could read all the books in such a library, even if he should give his entire life to it.

So Tom Edison consented to give up his ambition and to take up a course of selected reading instead. But even to this day, when he is one of the busiest men in the world, the great inventor is a constant reader.

Tom's Mother Would Read to Him About Engines

AUCTION BRIDGE

By R. F. Foster

Author of Foster on Auction, Auction Made Easy, Foster's Complete Hoyle, etc.

THERE are some little quirks in the management of the conventional double that might be called the etiquette of the bid. One of these is the recognition of the principle that if the opponents take out the double the partner of the doubler need not answer it unless he feels strong enough to do so, in spite of the intervening bid.

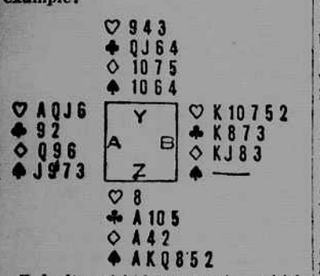
It often happens that when a player is doubled his partner will step in with an assist, not only to take early advantage of the opportunity to show that he can assist, but to make it expensive for the next player to answer the double.

The usual rule governing such cases is that if the partner of the doubler has no suit of more than four cards, or feels that he would have to risk too much by a bid, he may pass, if the double is taken out by the intervening opponent.

When the double is made by the fourth hand, it often happens that the original bidder will rebid his hand, and we get the same relief from the necessity of answering the double, with its consideration of the risk to be run by going too high in the bidding.

When the partner who is asked to make a bid has a suit of five cards, he is supposed to call it, as the extra length is enough to compensate for the risk taken in answering a double when it is no longer necessary to do so. A great many points are lost by players who do not stop to consider that they are not only relieved of the necessity to bid, but that the adverse contract has been pushed up. With partners who are in the habit of doubling on cards that do not justify it caution is essential.

When the partner will not answer the double that has been taken out by the intervening player, he is supposed to show clearly that he has no suit of five cards, and is either not afraid of the adverse contract or is very weak. In that case, it is up to the doubler to decide whether or not he is strong enough to demand an answer to the double with a suit of only four cards, and perhaps a very weak suit, at that. If so, all he need do is to double again. Here is an example:



Z dealt and bid two spades, which both A and Y passed, but B doubled. Z at once put in a bid of three spades. Having no suit of five cards, and with nine losers in hand, A felt that he was absolved from the duty of answering the double, so he passed.

B felt that he could not lose much by doubling again, as he would never be left in, and even if his partner had to call four in a minor suit they would have eight trumps between them, and Z's rebid, after starting with two spades, looked dangerously like a game hand.

Z passed, waiting to see what suit A would call, and A had to bid four hearts. Y cannot assist, as his trumps are worth nothing, there being no suit he can ruff, and B is more than pleased at the suit named. Nine trumps and two kings to be led up to is a pretty strong hand.

Z passed, almost tempted to take advantage of the free double, as it is called, which means that if the declarer makes his contract he wins the game anyhow; so that doubling will not help him any in that direction. Not only did A make his contract, but he got five-odd this way.

Y led the spade and dummy trumped. A small diamond brought the ace from Z, who at once led the trump, to stop as much of the ruff as he could. A won the trick and led a spade, got in with the diamond queen and ruffed dummy again.

Dummy then led the trump, the diamonds being set, and Z figured that the scheme would be for A to put Z in with his spade jack (marked in his hand as Y led the ten originally), and make him lead up to the dummy's kings. To avoid this Z blanked both his aces, as dummy could no longer trump spades.

The consequence was that after pulling Y's trumps and making two diamonds in dummy, when dummy led the small club, Z had to put on the ace, A having discarded his last spade. Now, A trumps the spade and leads the nine of clubs to dummy's king. The trick Z gained by a good trump lead he threw away by bad discarding later.

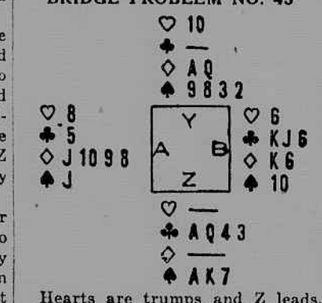
The solution to Problem No. 44, given last week, in which hearts were trumps, Z to lead and Y-Z to get all seven tricks, is as follows:

Z starts with a high diamond, on which Y plays the nine. Z follows with the spade trey, which Y trumps. Now Y can take out B's trump, at the same time giving Z the opportunity to shed the ace of clubs.

Now Y is free to lead two winning clubs, on the second of which B is in trouble with his discard, A having already been forced to discard on the trump lead, probably a spade.

The false opening is the spade. If Y trumps and leads trump, Z discarding the club, when Y leads the top club, B discards the spade ten. Z must discard a spade. Then on the next club B sheds the ace of spades, B still holding the king, having discarded a small diamond on the trump. Now, if Z discards a spade he loses a diamond trick. Pretty problem!

BRIDGE PROBLEM NO. 45



Hearts are trumps and Z leads. Y and Z want six tricks. How do they get them? Solution next week.

School for Card Players

AUCTION BRIDGE

Question: The dealer having bid a heart, second and third hand passing, the fourth hand bids two hearts. The opponents insist that this cannot be done, and that the fourth hand must bid some other suit or double, as the laws do not allow him to bid higher in the opponent's suit.—B. L. H.

Answer—There is no restriction as to the denomination of any call, so that it is a better bid than the previous bid. If one player bids a heart and one of his opponents thinks he can make two odd with hearts for trumps, he can bid it. Suppose second hand had bid two clubs, and his partner's best suit was hearts, having no clubs, why should he not bid two hearts?

Question: Where can one get the full text of the new laws for 1921?—K. C. C.

Address the secretary of The Whist Club, 13 West Thirty-sixth Street, New York. The price is 50 cents a copy.

Question: The dealer bids a spade, second hand passes and third hand holds queen, nine, six of spades, four hearts to the king, four clubs to the king and king and one diamond, on which he bids one no-trump. The dealer bets he should have passed.—E. L. M.

Answer—The no-trump bid denies the spades, as if the third hand had no assistance for that suit, whereas he has more than average help, and should have passed. It is not only a bad bid, but a very poor no-trumper.

Question: The bid is spades, and dummy wins the first trick with the ace of hearts. Trumps are then led once, and the declarer announces that he wins all the rest of the tricks, laying his cards on the table. The leader's partner still has a small trump, and demands that the declarer lead a heart, as this player has no heart and can ruff. The declarer says his cards cannot be called.—G. W. L.

Answer: The declarer is correct. As long as the declarer can win all the rest of the tricks, without taking any finesses, he can play his cards as he pleases.

POKER

Question—A asks for four cards in the draw, and picks them up one at a time as they are dealt to him. On getting the third in his hand he finds that he did not discard four, and has his full complement, so he says he does not want the fourth card laid off for him, which is still face down on the table. The dealer bets he must take it. If so, what card must A discard?—H. M. B.

Answer: No discard. His hand is foul, as he has lifted and looked at some of those asked for in the draw before correcting his mistake. He must take all four, so that he has six cards.

RUSSIAN BANK

Question: Can a player remove the top card from his stock pile and place it on his discard pile, so as to get at the card next the top on his stock pile?—Mrs. R.

Answer: No; because the cards that go on the discard pile are all from the player's hand, or are put on the discard by the opponent. Cards from the stock go only to the layout.

Says Columbus Was Seeking America, Not India

FOR the last fifteen years a tremendous controversy seems to have been raging here and there about the continents without touching the rank and file of humanity at any point. Chiefly it is concerned with the discovery of America, the motives of the exploration and all that sort of thing.

Vital as the subject may be after four hundred years, we think it rather late in the day for any heated argument. Any good business man would have closed his books on the deal and had the bills all receipted several centuries ago. Still, the debate appears good for many more seasons.

In a Nutshell

Personally, we hadn't heard an echo of the excitement until a few days ago, when some one passed us a small volume on The Columbian Tradition. And there the whole thing was in a nutshell—the Columbian tradition knocked down, trampled on, kicked in a corner and counted out. Briefly, the authenticity of the Columbian tradition was challenged and discredited.

Without waiting to hear what it all amounted to, we immediately rushed to the standard of the dear old tradition. Only over our dead body could any one cast aspersions against the man who discovered America. A fine piece of work, in our humble opinion, he did; and having said that, why not let the whole matter drop?

But such is not the way of the reformer. Give him a chance to upset a perfectly good tradition and he will never be happy until it has happened.

Look at Shakespeare

Just look what they did to Shakespeare! He hadn't been dead more than a century before the doubters began lifting their eyebrows and hinting that something was rotten in Denmark. Almost before night had fallen on the day it was first rumored that perhaps, after all, William Shakespeare wasn't William Shakespeare, several likely substitutes had been pushed into position. The Baconian theory seemed to top the field, but any one else would have done just as well.

You can never tell. No one is safe. If you don't want posterity disputing your claim to fame the sensible thing to do is to be on hand ready to present an identification card when the trouble begins. As soon as you cease living any one, apparently, can Dr. Cook you without even filing notice with the coroner.

So in this outraged spirit did we approach the Columbus debate. Having been brought up on the legend that Christopher Columbus discovered America, having been drilled by the schoolboy textbooks that "in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue" we had no intention of being convinced of anything to the contrary without a terrific struggle. This discrediting of facts would have to be mighty clear before we would believe.

And right here, on the threshold of our pent-up scorn, we discovered that Henry Vignaud, author of the excitement, was as firm a believer in the achievement of Columbus as we were ourselves. In fact, he goes us one better. Mr. Vignaud believes, according to his own account, that Columbus discovered America when he was out looking for America and for nothing else but America. Such faith is almost seraphic in its simplicity.

However, it made us all the more eager to proceed along with Mr. Vignaud, wherever the trail might lead. We were, as you might say, ready to lend a hand at any moment to help down the doubters.

Fortunately, Mr. Vignaud wasted no time in explaining the intricacies of the Columbian tradition. (Stupid that we shouldn't have known it before!) Actually, in plain English, it is nothing more than the belief that the object of Columbus's first voyage was to discover a short route to the East Indies via the west and that he just happened to stumble on America in the pursuit of that end. Or, as the slangsters have it, the explorer's plan was to achieve the Orient via the Occident.

Now that we come to think of it, the Columbian tradition is not such a stranger. We have met it many times before, only we didn't recognize it in the trimmings of an international controversy. Back in the dim days of second grade geography we can remember being rather awed at learning for the first time that if it hadn't been for a mere accident America might never have been discovered. Columbus was just lucky. That was all.

But we are certain that the part about the astronomer, Toscanelli, never penetrated. And that appears to be the real blow-out of the scenario.

The Toscanelli Tradition

According to the tradition, Paolo Toscanelli, a famous Florentine astronomer, advised seeking a new route to the East Indies by way of the west as early as 1474. He is reported to have forwarded his suggestion to Columbus, together with a map or chart indicating the route to be followed. Yielding to this counsel, it would appear that Columbus set out on his exploration, and thus it came about that America was discovered.

This view, however charitably interpreted, would give the main credit for America being what it is to-day to Toscanelli. At all events, it seems more than likely that if it had not been for Toscanelli we would all be living in some jolly old country across the sea, shaking our cocktails out in the open instead of softly behind barred doors. Which is, some may think, rather getting away from the controversy.

For the better part of the last 400 years this tradition has been accepted as authentic. America was an accidental country, entitled to a seat in the League of Nations, perhaps, but not a country with a regular, legitimate birth. Taking it all in all, from a genealogical standpoint, things have looked pretty dark.

Then, out of a shroud of mystery, came Henry Vignaud, president of the Société des Amerinistes, corresponding member of the Institut, etc. He brought forward an argument purporting to prove that America was rightly discovered by a licensed explorer who knew just what he was doing and asked advice from nobody. No credit at all could possibly be gathered in by the descendants of the Florentine astronomer.

All of this and much more were included in the Histoire de la Grande Entreprise de 1492 (easily translated by any veteran of the A. E. F.).

Bitter Words

By some chance this book escaped our notice. However, there were others in the field. Two eminent professors, Hermann Wagner, of the University of Göttingen, and Carlo Errera, of Bologna, saw the histoire and resented the heresy. They immediately launched a strenuous counter attack in the form of two serious studies, the one appearing in the report of the last Geographical International Congress held in Rome, the other in L'Archivio storico Italiano. Therein Mr. Vignaud's arguments were attacked with considerable force and not without some bitterness.

These volumes also appear to have caught us napping. We never heard of either of them. Not until receipt of Henry Vignaud's The Columbian Tradition, published by the Oxford University Press, may we definitely be termed to have entered the controversy as a non-participating spectator.

This last is Mr. Vignaud's reply to the professors—rather a belated reply, for the war intervened and Mr. Vignaud felt it was not the proper moment for continuing independent controversy, a decision which seems to us entirely fitting. The doughboy deserved his day. There should have been no distractions from the main conflict. But now with peace the armistice on Columbian matters has been suspended and the battle resumed.

"Out of respect for the rights of criticism I would have left this attack without reply," Mr. Vignaud addresses his opponents and others, "had not the matter under discussion been an event of such vast importance as the discovery of America, which has been wholly misrepresented by tradition.

A Debt to History

"But I owe it to myself and to historic truth, of which I am conscious of having been the interpreter, to prove that you have both remained under the seductive charm of the fairy tale that in 1492 the East was sought by way of the West, which has lulled us into error for a period of four centuries.

"I have not the presumption to believe that I can convince you," he continues candidly. "When any one has been nursed all his life in the belief that America was discovered by seeking to reach the furthest shores of Asia across the Atlantic he cannot recover from his illusion, as it is based not on a knowledge of facts, but upon fancies of a purely sentimental kind, fancies which no amount of demonstration can affect. But I dare hope that I may be more successful with those whose opinions are not definitely fixed and movable."

With no more ceremony than the above do we reopen the case of Columbus and the Gem of the Ocean.

Mr. Vignaud is a thorough investigator, as thorough as any man may well be of an event that has taken place so far back in the past. Yet constantly one feels the futility of trying to get at the true facts now that every one is dead and buried and the missing papers are lost or stolen.

No Mention of the East

In all the records preceding the voyage of 1492 Mr. Vignaud has found no mention of the East Indies as the object of the exploration. Not until after Columbus returned from his first trip, imagining he had reached the island of Cypangu in the East Indies, was there any intimation that he had set out with any other end in view than the discovery of new lands.

Years after the death of Columbus rumor became current that the real credit for the discovery belonged to a pilot whose name remained in obscurity. In passing from mouth to mouth among the jealous and ill disposed the story took on an exaggerated form and discounted much of the prestige of the explorer. Becoming alarmed at this state of affairs, Mr. Vignaud believes that Columbus's family invented the legend of Toscanelli documents to clear him from the reproach of having profited by the discovery of another.

While this lessened the importance of the part played by Columbus in the discovery of America, it silenced the story of the anonymous pilot. The legend of the search for the East by the way of the West was readily accepted by the people and has taken such root that Mr. Vignaud gravely doubts whether criticism will ever succeed in destroying it completely.

Was Seeking America

"There are some opinions which, once formed, are never relinquished," he reminds us. "I refer to those opinions which time has sanctioned and which have thereby sunk deep into our mental habits. The legends of Columbus seeking the East by way of the West and of Toscanelli being the originator of the discovery of America are among these."

But in his own mind Mr. Vignaud's views never waver.

"Columbus discovered America because he had divined its existence and because he set out to look for it until he had found it," he writes, and concludes with a final note of impatience. "Toscanelli has nothing to do with that great event."

Well, for one, we are glad the thing is settled. It was high time.

A Popular Hangman

ONE of Vienna's most respected citizens, writes the Vienna correspondent of The London Daily Mail, is Josef Lang, the "last imperial and royal executioner of Austria," a handsome and imposing old gentleman in his sixty-sixth year, who is still active deputy chief of the fire brigade in Simmering, the suburb in which he resides, and probably the most popular man in the district.

His volume of reminiscences, just published, and edited by Dr. Oscar Schalk, reveals him as a man of humane and generous disposition. He has brought up fifteen children, of whom only two were his own. He became executioner at forty-five, having been successively carpenter, soldier, stoker and coffee-house keeper.

He is very proud of the fact that his longest execution took only 65 seconds, the shortest 45.

But the most interesting of his disclosures relate to women of all classes who sought interviews with him at which they often made determined amatory advances. Some were content to look into his eyes or touch his hand. Many craved a thread of silk which had formed part of a noose actually used by him. Superstition was their main incentive.

He was once, on going to the governor's house to report himself, as he was bound to do on arrival, introduced to an aristocratic "afternoon tea," for which he was always well dressed on professional duty, as "Hofmeister Lang." There was some consternation when his identity was discovered, but this soon gave place to a fever of curiosity, and women surrounded him for hours with a fusillade of questions—and stole his pocket handkerchief as a memento of the occasion.

Women offered him anything he liked to ask if he would enable them to be present at an execution. He could take a certain number of men as his assistants, giving in their names beforehand, but he never took even men who had not some genuine scientific ground for asking, and never women, though there were many women who were quite willing to act as his actual assistants. He never had to execute a woman and was heartily glad of it.

If only for its sidelights on superstition this is a remarkable book. Lang's pre-war correspondence, much of which his wife often burned unopened, consisted mainly of requests for locks of hair, his own or else from a "patient," and for all imaginable articles that had been touched by him or by a hanged murderer. And Lang himself is not without superstition. He always carries about with him a tiny skein containing a thread from each silk noose he has used to launch a man into eternity.